

# TELEVISION VIEWING AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT REVISITED

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The purpose of this paper is to provide readers with a summary of the literature from the last 25 years regarding the impact of television viewing on student achievement and necessary behaviors for school success. Although the overall picture is muddled, the following initial conclusions are offered: (a) moderate levels of viewing are better than high levels or no viewing at all, (b) the type of programming is more critical than the intrinsic qualities of the medium itself, (c) high informational viewing generally correlates positively with achievement, while low informational viewing correlates negatively (d) once IQ, SES, and other mediating factors are accounted for, the relationship weakens, (e) it is not clear at this time whether negative television viewing causes or is caused by low levels of achievement, and (f) because cultural and socioeconomic differences and responses to TV viewing exist, educators must view each case on a situational basis. Intervention strategies for educators and parents are included.

## **Introduction:**

Given the central role popular media plays in the lives of our children, it is important to have an understanding of the impact television viewing has on academic achievement and school performance. Parents and teachers alike ask the question of how much television viewing is too much. Few people would argue that an investigation of children's TV viewing habits could help parents better understand how youth occupy their free time. In addition, there has been growing concern over the relationship between the media and rising violence and other antisocial behaviors among youth.

The relationships between TV viewing and academic achievement, age, home environment, and other variables are complex, multidimensional, and inconclusive (Bachen, et al., 1982; Beentjes & Van der Voort, 1988; Broome & Fuller, 1993;

Razel, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to provide readers with a summary of the literature from the last 25 years regarding the impact of television viewing on student achievement and necessary behaviors for school success. Although the general picture from research is somewhat muddled, an initial understanding of the question can be achieved, nonetheless. It is hoped that this review of literature will provide a basis to implement sound educational policy and family practice.

## **A Summary of Television Effects Research:**

More than half of U.S. students watch more than three hours of television per day on weekdays, and 60% of parents rarely or never limit their child's television viewing habits (Levine & Levine, 1996). The average television weekly viewing time is approximately 27 hours per week, while

the average reading time is 8.1; a 3 to 1 ratio (Angle, 1981). Studies (Levine & Levine, 1996; Wells & Blendinger, 1997) support the finding that children watch too much TV and read too little. It has been argued that a negative side effect of high levels of viewing might include the promotion of "unintelligent consumerism" and a physically and intellectually passive dependency among our youth (Levine & Levine, 1996).

Viewing habits typically increases throughout elementary school years, and decreases during high school years. The years right before and after adolescence are the most opportune times to shape TV viewing habits (Clark, et al., 1978). Individuals in lower income brackets and with lower educational levels watch more television (Housden, 1991; Mediamark Research Inc, 1996). Adolescents who view television during late night hours average more television viewing than do other adolescents (Potter, 1987). African American youth tend to watch more TV than their white counterparts (Caldas & Bankston, 1999). Teens who are in the lowest per week viewing category are more likely to continue their education by enrolling in college (Corporation for Public Broadcast, 1993).

Some of the studies reviewed found no significant relationship at all (Gortmaker, Salter, Walker & Dietz, 1990b; Hagborg, 1995; Shastri & Mohite, 1997). A few studies (Felter, 1984; Kohr, 1979) uncovered a large and significant negative relationship, while most others (Angle, 1981; Clark, et al., 1978; Cooper & Valentine, 1999; Dornsbush, 1986; Gorman & Yu, 1990; Patrick, 1991; Tymms, 1997) found smaller, yet significant negative relationships. Naturally, parents' failure to provide

guidelines for television viewing has a lot to do with the attitudes and values of today's children (Clark, et al., 1978; Levine & Levine, 1996; Sharman, 1979).

Patrick (1991) discovered that higher school social studies achievement is associated with "limited television viewing". Felter (1984) reported that achievement scores in reading, math, and written expression were "sharply lower" among students who viewed more than six hours of television per day. Researchers (Dornsbush, 1986; Potter, 1987) have stated that a negative relationship does not begin to manifest itself until a child exceeds a 10 or more hour per week threshold, with the strongest negative relationship observed for 30 or more hours of viewing. Razel (2001) reported a curvilinear relationship for each age group up to 20 years. Each category had an optimal range of viewing times that allowed for a positive impact up to a certain amount, and a negative impact after a point of saturation. The fact that pre-second grade children possessed a larger positive relationship than older children might be a reflection of the quality of programming targeted at the younger group. According to the analysis, optimal viewing time decreased with age, which provided for an overall negative relationship when age group was not disaggregated. The author is careful to report the findings as preliminary.

The impact of television on social adjustment and youth behavior is also not fully understood. Tentative findings are that high amounts of television viewing are associated with relatively poor social skills and peer relations among some youth populations (Clark, et al., 1978; Levine & Levine, 1996). In one study (Sharman, 1979), there was a relationship between

low self-esteem and heavy viewing of cartoons, which is often viewed as a form of escapist behavior. When total hours of all types of programming were considered, however, the relationship was not significant. Another study (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger & Wright, 2001) found that preschoolers, male subjects in particular, who had an opportunity to view educational TV behaved less aggressively as adolescents.

For a short time during the 1980's, the television industry responded positively to criticism about violence on TV, but the 1990's saw a rise in the amount of negative portrayals (Levine & Levine, 1996). Some writers (McVey, 1999; Minow & LaMay, 1995; Plagens, 1991; Sager, 1994; Stroman, 1991) have found that heavy amounts of childhood television viewing which promoted violence was associated with adult participation in violent crimes. Negative impacts might include the promotion of increased violence, teenage pregnancy, sexual perversion, disrespect for adults, and the stereotyping of low-status minorities and women. It is quite likely, however, that adults underestimate children's abilities to separate themselves from the violence, negativity, and the unrealistic problem solving messages of contemporary programming (Broome & Fuller, 1993). Generally speaking, it appears the effects of TV on violent behaviors of youth are largely dependent on situational factors, however.

Research to date has not successfully disentangled the relationship between TV viewing and reading scores (Beentjes & Van der Voort, 1988; Wober, 1992). We know that formal schooling is not the only variable that impacts reading ability (Bachen, et al., 1982). Preliminary find-

ings are that positive television viewing has the potential to enhance reading comprehension skills for younger children (Razel, 2001; Van den Broek, 2001), and can be associated with higher grades and the reading of more books (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger & Wright, 2001). However, IQ is a confounding variable that must be considered in all future research. Once IQ, SES, and other mediating factors are accounted for, the relationship between TV viewing and achievement weakens (Angle, 1981; Gortmaker, 1990a; Hornik, 1981; Potter, 1987).

Race and class differences exist, but more research is needed to clear up a clouded picture. Low teacher expectation, non-involvement of parents in the child's homework, and high levels of TV viewing appear to work together to produce academic failure for minority students (Viadero & Johnston, 2000a, 2000b). We do know that there is greater usage of television by lower socioeconomic families and inner-city minorities compared to suburban dwellers and whites (Clark, et al., 1978). On the other hand, Gorman and Yu (1990) found a negative relationship between science achievement and high viewer behavior of white students, and were unable to find a relationship for black and Hispanic students. Caldas and Bankston (1999) posit that black youth utilize higher TV viewing habits and relationships among friends who possess a "television culture" as a means to offset the negative impact of homes and neighborhoods higher in incidences of single parent and dysfunctional family settings. Once family structure is accounted for, however, black patterns became similar to that of whites.

Gender roles can play a small but important role in understanding the relationship. In one study (Sharman, 1979), children of lesser-educated fathers watched more entertainment television and exhibited more before school and unsupervised viewing behaviors. Children of higher educated fathers viewed less before school and unsupervised television, and watched more documentaries and less entertainment programming. Henggeler and Cohen (1991) found that a father's dissatisfaction with his marriage and a mother's stress level and related symptomatology were associated with high levels of child television viewing.

Many writers (Angle, 1981; Bachen, et al., 1982; Bianculli, 1992; Eastman, 2001; Levine & Levine, 1996; Razel, 2001) have demonstrated that not all television is harmful to children; television can yield positive, as well as negative results. Children from lower classes potentially benefit if viewing is done in moderate doses, as opposed to large doses or no amounts at all (Housden, 1991; Levine & Levine, 1996). Benefits for pre-school aged children are best realized if viewing doesn't exceed 3 hours a day (Razel, 2001). Interestingly, a few teenagers surveyed claimed TV offered a "wall of sound" that helped them block out distractive and uninviting home environments. This provided them a more conducive environment to complete homework assignments (Wober, 1992).

Whether television's information enriches, impoverishes, or has no effect on student achievement is partially dependent on the content and quality of the programming instead of intrinsic qualities of the medium itself (Caldas & Bankston, 1999; St.

Peters, Fitch, Huston, Wright & Eakins, 1991; Razel, 2001). If students are exposed to programs with high informational content (i.e., news programs or documentaries) students have a better opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills (Housden, 1991; Memory, 1992). If most of the viewing is of the low informational content variety (i.e., shorter fast-action shows, cartoons, music videos, soap operas) an opportunity for a detrimental academic impact is increased (Geist, 2000; Potter, 1987).

The role television should or should play as an official part of the school's curriculum is a debate that is decades old. Kohr (1979) performed an analysis of data collected from 90,000 fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders from 750 schools and found no significant individual student level differences, but discovered a strong negative relationship at the school level. One longitudinal study (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger & Wright, 2001) found that adolescents who watched educational programs as preschoolers had a positive effect on their grades, behavior, creativity, and social behavior during later years. Another study (Wright, Austin, Aletha, Murphy, St. Peters, Pinon & Kotler, 2001) found that viewing of child-audience informative programs between ages 2 and 3 predicted higher academic performance of low-income children. Others are not as optimistic about the long-range benefits of children's educational TV shows such as *Sesame Street*. Some contend that the learning involved has the potential to reinforce trivial cognitive skills and produce distractible learners with short attention spans (Levine & Levine, 1996; Neuman, 1995).

A common explanation for the negative relationship between television viewing and achievement is the displacement hypothesis. In short, viewing displaces activities that are educationally more valuable (Hagborg, 1995). Neuman (1995) identifies two additional theories readily endorsed by researchers: (a) the information processing theory - television trains student to process information in a different manner than what schools require, and (b) the short-term gratification theory - television programming promotes short attention spans and quick-fix, magical answers that are non-conducive to high levels of school success. A combination of all three theories most likely mirrors reality in contemporary society.

#### **General Discussion:**

There are many gaps in the literature. The impact of parental control, social class, race, and peer pressure is not fully understood. The inability to disentangle multiple variables has plagued the television effects literature (Levine & Levine, 1995). Some studies show a correlation with one population, but not for others. Methodological problems have been noted, namely the reliance on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal approaches (Gortmaker & Salter, 1990a), the underutilization of social context (Caldas & Bankston, 1999), and the failure to account for the influence of IQ and other mediating factors (Angle, 1981; Hornik, 1981; Potter, 1987).

Since the effects of television viewing are not monolithic, care must be taken to consider various socioeconomic and environmental factors as well as the reasons for viewing. Clearly, program content is a more important consideration than quali-

ties of the medium itself. An area that needs more attention is the impact school-supported television viewing has on achievement. Many educators use television quite extensively in their teaching practices, and would greatly benefit in knowing more about how to offset negative influences. At this point in time, it is not clear whether television viewing causes or is caused by low levels of achievement (Potter, 1987; Razel, 2001).

In summary, the research appears to be saying that high levels of unsupervised mindless television viewing, especially when it is done in lieu of daily reading or other academic stimulation, can have the potential to exert harmful effects on achievement. The utilization of informational television, both in and out of the classroom, can have a positive impact on student achievement if properly channeled. Moderate levels of meaningful and supervised television viewing may be better for children than too much or no viewing at all.

#### **Implications for Parents and Educators:**

Findings on the effects of television viewing on academic achievement, study habits, negative behavior, and social skills are largely inconclusive and situational based. Although what we don't know about the impact of television viewing on youth is more than what we do know, we are able, nonetheless, to construct a preliminary intervention approach. Because cultural and socioeconomic differences and responses to TV viewing exist, educators and parents must view each case on a situational basis. Ways in which society can mitigate potential negative effects has begun to surface.

Starting at the core of remediation, parents must become more involved in monitoring the quality and quantity of their children's television viewing habits (Viadero & Johnson, 2000a). We must not be afraid to make a TV plan with our children based on the following suggestions (Broome & Fuller, 1993; Eastman, 2001; Moss, 1998): Parents should require that homework and chores be completed before children partake in the pleasures of recreational TV. They must demand that children engage themselves in individual reading and family socialization time away from the television set. It is prudent to mandate that children include so many hours of informational programming into their viewing diet. Children under four years of age should have little or not exposure to violence. Look for shows based on children's books. A certain amount of viewing should be done together as a family. It is recommended that TV time be turned into thinking time. Talking and thinking about TV helps reduce its negative impact. The utilization of one's VCR and video rentals to prescreen what is viewed is wise.

Classic movies and informational shows can serve to bring families together. Parents who come home late from work might find it helpful to have teenagers report on the specific content of their television viewing before they are allowed special privileges. It also may not hurt to have young children keep TV logs of their viewing, and provide summaries or drawings of what is good and not so good about various television shows as a way to earn reward tokens. Parents may want to keep an atlas and reference books near so that children can look up places they hear on

the news. Point out how various school subjects are often incorporated into TV shows. Use commercials to clarify questions. Explain how TV sometimes promotes stereotypes. Help children understand that the messages behind commercials are mostly profit driven. Lastly, parents might consider discussing with their children the pros and cons of values promoted by today's pop media. Research suggests that after clarifying values, people feel more energetic, more critical in their thinking, and are more likely to follow through on decisions (Alexander, 2000).

Likewise, educators must find ways to make television an educational resource instead of an enemy (Broome & Fuller, 1993). Schools would do better by embracing the medium and promoting homework via television. Classroom teachers might encourage students to (a) supplement their learning with viewing documentaries that corroborate subject matter found in textbooks, (b) provide updated statistics through current events reporting, (c) write reports on television programs about history, (d) contrast how a single event is reported by two different news stations, (e) critique informational shows for accuracy and objectivity, (f) report on television interviewing strategies and techniques, and (g) encourage greater reading comprehension and ability through the viewing of TV performing arts presentations (Memory, 1992).

In addition, Levine & Levine (1996) suggest the following suggestions for classroom teachers and administrators to consider:

1. Utilize a "window of opportunity" com-



- ponent that considers age appropriateness and child development theory;
2. Utilize policies and practices that draw on literature about risk factors and validated strategies that change high-risk behaviors;
3. Attack academic problems within a holistic environmental and "family systems" approach; and
4. Encourage activities and lesson plans that teach very young children how to differentiate between fact and fiction.

More conclusive research is needed to back up the preliminary findings of this report. Although some of the suggestions offered in this paper are obvious, failure to abide by them is far too common. Too often, there exists a parenting mindset of omission that ends up having monumental repercussions for a whole generation of youth. Since children find ways to watch TV regardless of adult supervision, it is best to teach and train them in the proper usage of a medium that could help them prepare for better school and career advancement.

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The author believes that each person has their own leadership abilities, and no single leadership style is better than any other one. Matching a person's style with a specific assignment leads to success for the person, their colleagues, and the organization. The key is to identify and to actualize each person's natural leadership style.

The author provides a full description of seven types of leaders-Dynamic Aggressive, Dynamic Assertive, Dynamic Supportive, Adaptive Aggressive, Adaptive Assertive, Adaptive Supportive, and

Creative Assertive. Each different style provides valuable insight into one's own behavior and the strengths of those around one. The author provides seven virtues that are critical for all leaders but are often overlooked in typical educational leadership programs.

The author provides questionnaires and focus questions to help the reader analyze leadership potential in one's self and in colleagues. He shows you how to go about the crucial process of matching leadership qualities with specific jobs in the educational system, from teachers to superintendent. Understanding the natural leadership qualities and virtues helps one to create an educational environment characterized by excellence.

